

Amnesiopolis: Modernity, Space, and Memory in East Germany

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REVIEWS

Rubin, Eli. *Amnesiopolis: Modernity, Space, and Memory in East Germany*. Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2016. xiii + 186 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Notes. Appendices. Bibliography. Index. £50.00.

THE German Democratic Republic (GDR) left its imprint on the East German cityscape in numerous ways, most conspicuously in the massive *Plattenbausiedlungen* — prefabricated housing estates — that were built on the outskirts of many cities in the 1970s and 1980s. While they have more recently proven to be the cause of social, economic and material problems, they formed the centrepiece of Honecker's 'real existing socialism', and promised to be the utopian future of socialism. Following Le Corbusier's modernist 'towers in a park' concept, in which new cities were to be built on a *tabula rasa*, away from the material and moral decay of the old city mired by class oppression, the new environment was to be a place of forgetting or, in Eli Rubin's words, an *amnesiopolis*. As Rubin argues in this illuminating book, however, the past could not always be kept at bay, and while such estates presented a utopia for many new residents, they were also inextricably enmeshed within the structures of the party and the state.

As a case study of Marzahn, the GDR's largest housing project on the outskirts of East Berlin, *Amnesiopolis* provides us with much detail on the planning and construction of an area that came to house just under 290,000 people. However, it also attempts to do much more than this. Through the examination of a variety of archival sources, published memoirs and interviews, Rubin seeks to investigate residents' experiences of space and memory, in order to shed light on the quotidian and often diffuse structures of power that infused life in such socialist spaces. He does so in five chapters, the first two of which focus on the historical development and construction of Marzahn, and trace the original plan to resettle workers on the outskirts of the city back to the early twentieth century. Despite the GDR's presentation of its *Plattenbausiedlungen* as radically new, the idea itself had been around for decades — and paradoxically featured in Albert Speer's plan for Berlin. During the construction process itself, Germany's more distant past also emerged through archaeological remains in the area — a sign that settlements were not being built on this land for the first time. Rubin's examination of the construction of Marzahn is rich in detail, covering highly technical aspects, as well as a broader discussion of the prestige attached to the project, demonstrated for example through its potential for generating high-profile propaganda. The latter three chapters each focus on a key element of Marzahn: first, the new sensory experience offered to residents, who often moved in while construction continued around them, second, the 'growth' of the neighbourhood and its young inhabitants (30 per cent of residents were under the age of eighteen) and third, the centrality of the

Stasi and surveillance activities to the urban fabric of Marzahn. Together, these chapters offer new insight into the physical, sensual and ideological realities of life in a large-scale Plattenbausiedlung of the late 1970s and 1980s: one which held the utopian promise of socialism in so many ways, yet which also nurtured the dystopian world of surveillance. As Rubin states, the Marzahn experience was one of ‘upward mobility, new beginnings, and general happiness’ for most and was marked by an everyday normality, but ‘behind the scenes, the Stasi was the glue that held everything together; it was often the reason for the production of this “normality”’ (p. 133). It is, thus, little surprise that the strong sense of community in such neighbourhoods largely disappeared along with the organisations of the state and party after 1989.

Amnesiopolis not only provides a balanced and rigorously researched account of the material and social history of Marzahn, but it asks searching questions about the impact of our spatial and material surroundings on our sense-memories and human interactions. It is both engaging and highly readable, and despite the odd typo and an incorrect date, it is an extremely valuable addition to the growing body of literature on everyday life in the GDR, and will appeal to those interested not only in GDR history, but also in urban studies, geography, memory studies and sociology. While it might have been interesting to investigate the post-*Wende* period in more detail, such an endeavour doubtless warrants a study of its own. Although Marzahn may currently be seen as a place with no past and no future, there remains much to learn from its study in the present.

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